

The ROOTS of RAIL

By Matt Hiebert

Highlights of Missouri Railroads from Steam to Diesel

Photographs
Courtesy of Missouri
State Archives



Missouri Pacific Depot, Jefferson City



M.K. & T. Depot, Columbia

If you want to get technical about it, the first railroad in Missouri was probably a 5-mile length of track laid from Richmond to the Missouri River sometime between 1849 and 1851. The line was entirely made of wood – including the rails – and powered by a horse. So says the *Encyclopedia of the History of Missouri* by Howard L. Conrad.



As accurate as that factoid may be, that's not the image that arises when we think of early Missouri railroads.

Instead, rail titans like Frisco, Missouri Pacific, Rock Island and Wabash are more likely to come to mind. These and others are the companies that eventually laid the steel from east to west and north to south across the state, making Missouri one of the most important railroad hubs in the United States, a title it still holds today.

During the early to mid-1800s railroad fever was sweeping across the world, especially in the still young United States. Trains were the harbingers of the industrial revolution and represented a profound step in transportation technology. Steamboats and horse-drawn wagons had been the primary movers of goods and people until then. Now tons of passengers and profit could cross thou-

sands of miles of countryside in a matter of days. Missouri was not about to be left out.

The early years of rail in the state were marked by good intentions, grand ambitions and lots of false starts.

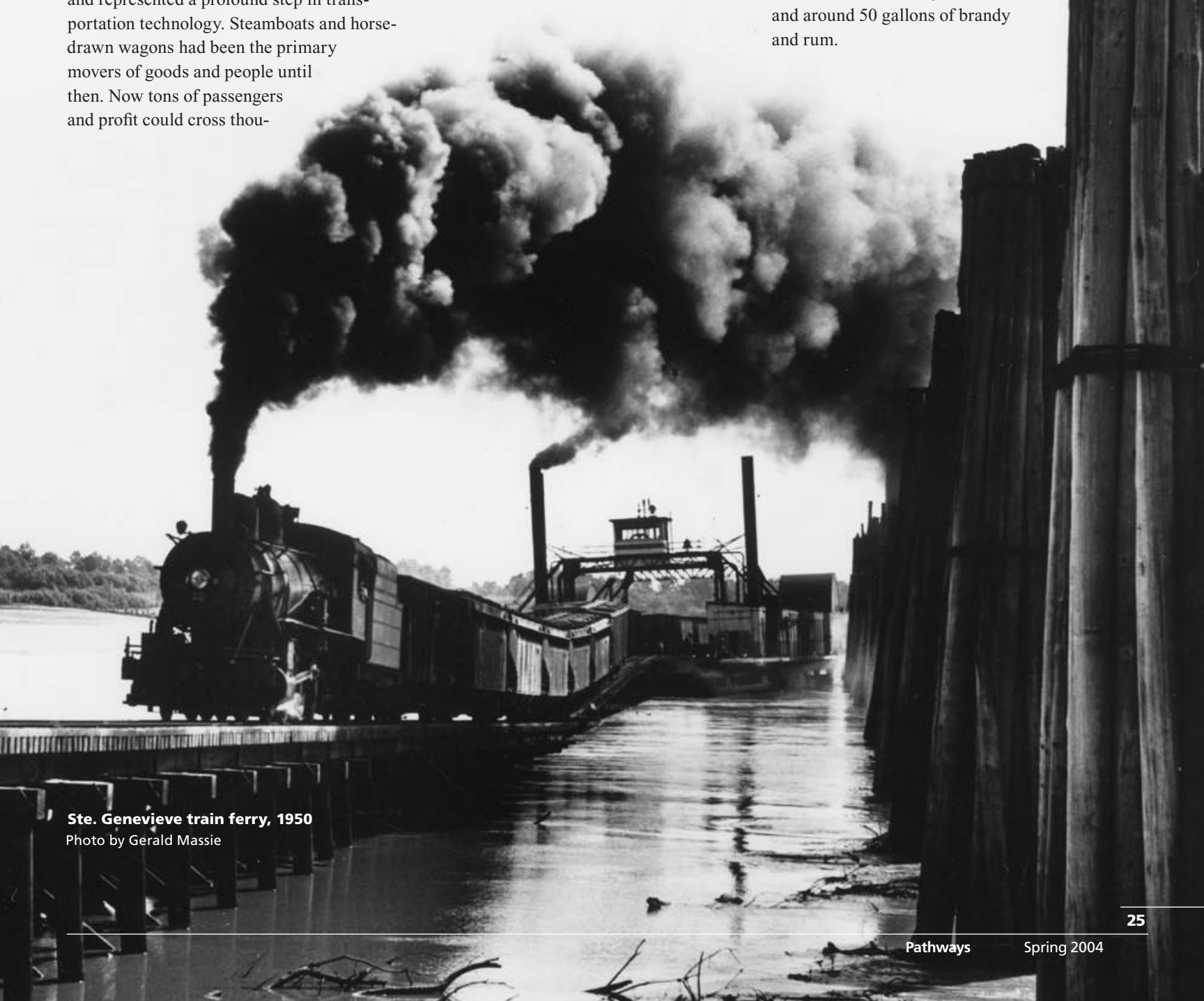
According to Conrad, the first Missouri railroad convention took place in 1836 and consisted of representatives from only 10 counties. Attendees adopted a resolution calling for a railroad between St. Louis and Fayette. They even asked for public land grants from the Missouri legislature, which went one step further by chartering 18 separate railroads during the same session.

The new railroads were named, mapped and given an estimated cost. The results: not one was ever finished. In fact, they weren't even started. There simply wasn't enough money in state coffers to get the job going.

It wasn't until 1851 that the first steel track began to spread westward.

Two Firsts

It was on July 4 of that year that the Pacific Railroad groundbreaking took place in St. Louis amidst great fanfare and celebration. More than 25,000 people showed up for the event, which included a 100-gun salute, several military bands and around 50 gallons of brandy and rum.



Ste. Genevieve train ferry, 1950
Photo by Gerald Massie

However, like many of the early tales of Missouri railroads, the event segued into progress that flowed like molasses. It took 18 more months for the first 5 miles of track to reach Cheltenham, a St. Louis suburb. It would take another four years to make it half way across the state to Jefferson City.

Just after the Pacific ground breaking, another major rail event was occurring in Missouri.

The Hannibal & St. Joseph Railroad began its trek across northern Missouri in 1852. Ground was broken in Hannibal with celebrations rivaling those earlier in St. Louis. And, like that of the Pacific, the journey of the railroad was a slow one. After land was acquired and graded, it took seven full years for the line to be completed between St. Joseph and Hannibal.

Finally, on Feb. 14, 1859, the first train chugged over the rails between the two border towns, making the Hannibal-St. Joe the first railroad to cross Missouri.



Frisco passenger yards, Monett

Expansion in the North and South

In 1855, the Pacific began working on a southern branch that would go through Rolla, Lebanon and Springfield. Agricultural and mineral resources in the Ozarks were still taking the slow way to market, a fact speculators used to fuel support for the line.

By 1860 the Southwest Branch had reached Rolla where it stalled due to the Civil War. It would be 1870 before Springfield saw the first passenger train pull in. By that time the line had fallen into receivership, twice, and was now owned by the South Pacific Railroad Co., that would soon lose the line to the Atlantic and Pacific.

Meanwhile, in the upper half of the state, the North Missouri was laying track from St. Charles westward, basically bringing the town of Moberly into existence. By the early 1870s, that line had consolidated with another line and was known as the St. Louis, Kansas City and Northern Railroad.

Civil War

In the 1860s, the frantic expansion of railroads in Missouri took a break, largely due to the fact that they were being burned, dismantled and sabotaged by the Confederate Army. It was not a good time for railroads anywhere in the state. Those that survived were mainly used to transport troops and supplies.

However, there is one point about Missouri railroads during the Civil War that deserves mention. During the war years, the Hannibal & St. Joseph was the farthest western railroad in the fractured nation. Such a distinction earned it a degree of Union protection.

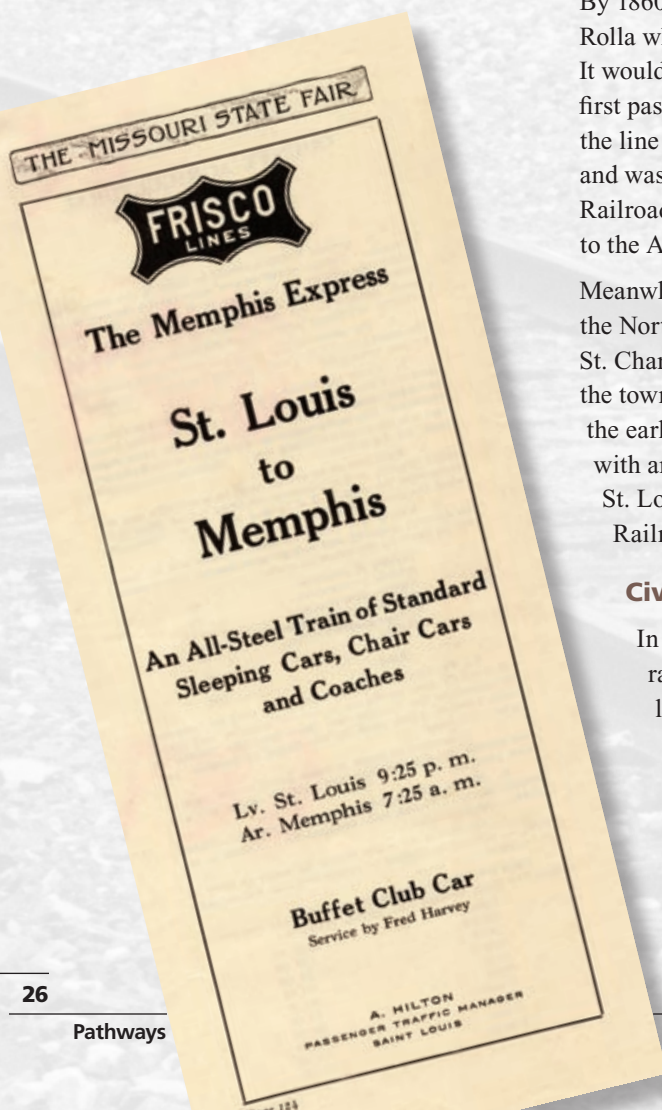
In 1861 Ulysses S. Grant, then a colonel with the 21st Illinois, was ordered to enter Missouri and protect the line. During that time, Grant and his troops moved south, stopping in Mexico, Jefferson City and finally at the terminal point of the Iron Mountain Railroad where he received his promotion to brigadier general.

The Post-War Decades

After the smoke cleared from the Civil War, steel rails spread quickly across the state to form the roots of a growing industry. New bridges crossing the Missouri and Mississippi were raised with almost the same fanfare as the opening of the lines themselves.

It was a time for acquisitions, bankruptcies and foreclosures. Short lines popped in and out of existence practically overnight. Larger lines absorbed smaller ones for their existing track and infrastructure. Small companies merged just to survive.

The Southwest line split from the Atlantic and Pacific to become the St. Louis and San Francisco Railway Company with a goal to reach the Pacific coast. Unfortunately, it would never make it. The Gold Spike in Promontory, Utah, put an end to the coastal



race. The line would later become known as Frisco and serve Missouri, Arkansas, Oklahoma and other southern states.

At around the same time, the Wabash chugged in from the east and acquired the troubled North Missouri line. As the Wabash, the line absorbed two smaller companies, which allowed it to reach Kansas City and gain a firm foothold in Missouri, Iowa and Illinois. The line later would gain notoriety from the popular song “Wabash Cannonball.”

Governing the New Form of Transportation

Expansion was only part of the railroad story during the late 1800s. As railroads grew in size and number, so did their importance to midwestern farmers. By the 1870s, railroads held immense power over the agricultural industry.

Farmers had quickly become dependent on the speed and convenience of rail. Markets were now days away, rather than weeks. Not only could goods reach American consumers quicker, it also meant that coastal ports were accessible, thus opening new European markets.

But the railroads of the time saw another opportunity. They began raising freight prices to make as much off the farmers as possible. The practice became so costly that farmers banded together and started the “Granger Movement” to fight short-haul rate hikes.

Although the battle would go back and forth for many years to come, the movement helped create something else: regulation of the transportation industry.

Although not one of the original “Granger States,” Missouri was still affected by the movement and began public regulation



Missouri Pacific engine no. 152

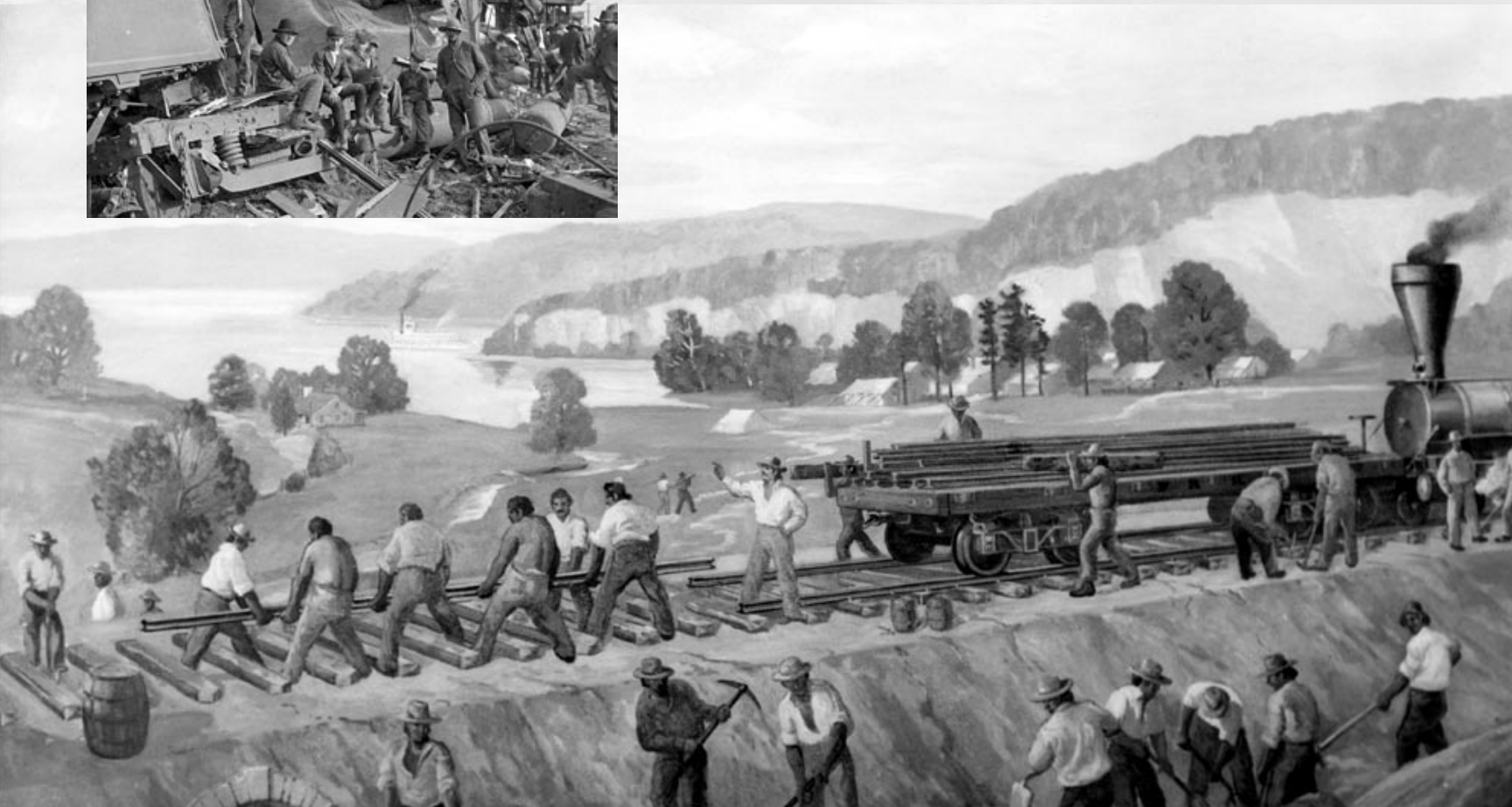


Hannibal and St. Joseph locomotive

Wreck on Sante Fe, Chicago Express at Dean Lake, Oct. 28, 1903



Mural depicting construction of the Union Pacific railroad, circa 1870





Marmaduke

of the rail industry. One of the first state officials to oversee railroads was a man named John Marmaduke.

During the civil war, Marmaduke fought for the Confederacy and was best known for killing his commanding officer in a duel. In 1875, as part of the Missouri Railroad commission, he championed the cause of farmers and is considered a pioneer of transportation regulation. In 1884, he would become governor of the state.

End of One Century, Beginning of Another

The end of the 19th Century found railroads thriving in Missouri. An annual report released by the railroad and warehouse commission in 1898 showed the state had 146 railroads operated by 58 separate companies. More than 42 million passengers were sharing the rails with 95 million tons of cargo.

By this time the railroad that would become the Missouri, Kansas, Texas line, more commonly called the Katy, had found its way to Columbia, while the Rock Island was laying the last length of rail to Bland and Eldon.

Down in the Bootheel, entrepreneur and part time folk hero Louis Houck was still basking in his short-lived victory against railroad tycoon Jay Gould for control of Missouri's southeast lines. While Houck had emerged victorious in several legal battles against the rail Goliath, his success would later follow the path of foreclosure so many short lines had trod before him.

As the 20th Century rolled in, there would be more acquisitions, more bankruptcies and more successes. But the greatest changes to the industry would be in technology.

The 1934 Worlds Fair featured an exhibit that would change railroads forever. It was called the Pioneer Zephyr, and it was the first diesel-powered passenger train. Operated and owned by the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy line, the train was the shape of things to come for railroads in Missouri and the world. It also spelled the beginning of the end for steam power.

But that wasn't the technological blow that started the knockout count for the passenger industry. Another bit of machinery was spreading around the world at about this time that would have an even bigger impact on American railroads.

It ran on gasoline and didn't need rails to get where it was going.

As automobiles became more important – and later essential – to the American transportation picture, the decline of the passenger train was inevitable. By the time

President Dwight Eisenhower signed the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1954, the writing was on the sleeping compartment wall.

Still Riding the Rails

Trains are still vital to Missouri's transportation system.

Today there are 18 separate companies serving Missouri. You've probably heard of some of them: Burlington Northern-Santa Fe, Union Pacific, Norfolk Southern. They are the ones that survived and thrived through the bankruptcies, acquisitions, wars and upstart technologies. Even passenger trains still have a place in Missouri with an Amtrak route running between St. Louis and Kansas City. That's an impressive fact considering many states haven't seen a passenger train in decades. Today, MoDOT helps keep Amtrak's steel wheels turning by procuring funding for the organization.

Although the future of Missouri rail is an ever-changing montage of possibilities, it's safe to say trains will play an important role in the state's commerce and transportation picture for many decades to come. ■

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Editor's Note

This article is not intended to convey the entire history of railroads in Missouri. Instead, its purpose is to capture a snapshot of the significant companies, figures and lines that left their mark on the state's history and development. The story simply touches some of the highlights that helped make Missouri one of the largest American rail centers of the 20th Century.

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